Towards a conservation plan for the Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres*: identifying priorities for research and conservation

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Vers un plan de conservation pour le Vautour chassefiente *Gyps coprotheres*: identifier les priorités de recherche et de conservation. L'aire de distribution et la population du Vautour chassefiente *Gyps coprotheres*, une espèce endémique sud-africaine menacée, continuent à diminuer. Comme premier pas vers la compilation et la mise en œuvre d'un plan stratégique de conservation, un atelier a été organisé en Afrique du Sud, le 12 mars 2006. Pour le rapport, voir www.nmmu.ac.za/ace; un bref aperçu est présenté ici.

Despite over 30 years of research and conservation attention, resulting in the production of over 1,500 scientific, semi-scientific, popular and educational papers, articles and reports, the global range and population of the Cape Griffon (=Cape Vulture) *Gyps coprotheres*, a threatened southern African endemic, continues to decrease, seemingly inexorably. The species is listed as Vulnerable in the South African Red Data Book (Anderson 2000). The main reason for the lack of success in halting and reversing the species' decline is considered to be the absence of an overall subcontinental conservation plan, resulting in conservation efforts being fragmented, uncoordinated and not priority-driven. As a first step towards the compilation and implementation of a strategic conservation plan, an expert workshop was organised, with the overall aim of identifying research and conservation priorities, and kickstarting a process to compile and implement a practicable conservation plan. The full report from the workshop is available at www.nmmu.ac.za/ace; a brief account is presented below.

A group of 21 persons, including an independent facilitator, was invited to attend the workshop, which took place on 12 March 2006 in Harrismith, Free State Province, South Africa. The 20 participants represented a range of southern African vulture conservation and research interests, expertise and experience. Comprehensive geographical coverage of participants was achieved, with workers active in South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia—i.e. all range states—being present.

Consensus was reached on the conservation goal for the species—to stabilise the Cape Griffon population. Sixteen known or suspected mortality factors were listed, and for each of these the current scenario (e.g. what is known and unknown), research requirements and proposed conservation actions were discussed, and a summary thereof was captured in a matrix. Following this, each participant was granted 16 votes (=the total number of listed mortality factors) and asked to allocate them, as they saw fit, to one or more of the 16 factors, according to the perceived relative importance of each factor. The outcome of this simple ranking procedure is presented in Table 1.

At the workshop it was agreed that an appropriate monitoring and evaluation programme, to track demographic changes in relation to conservation actions, and to detect the emergence of new threats, needs to be designed and implemented. However, the operation of such a programme will be largely meaningless unless 'on-the-ground' conservation actions are implemented, as a priority.

Since some 18 'core' colonies hold *c.*80% of the Cape Griffon population, conservation action must focus on them. A Cape Griffon Task Force (CGTF), comprising a coordinator and a group of core colony 'champions' and associated volunteers, will be established. Its overall role will be to oversee the compilation and implementation of conservation plans, at local and regional levels, for each of the 18 'core' colonies, and to exercise accountability for the effectiveness of the implementation of these plans. Action plans for individual core colonies are to be closely guided by the outcomes of this workshop, especially as expressed in Table 1 above and in the matrix (see Boshoff & Anderson 2006), but unique local circumstances must be catered for. The Birds of Prey Working

Table 1. Ranking of the 16 factors that are considered contributory to the decline of the Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres*, as determined by 16 (the number of participants present when the ranking exercise was conducted) workshop participants. Priority ranking values are qualified by numbers of votes per factor (1 = highest priority, 16 = lowest priority).

Tableau 1. Classement des 16 facteurs considérés comme contribuant au déclin du Vautour chassefiente *Gyps coprotheres* par 16 participants à l'atelier (le nombre de participants présents lors de l'exercice). Le classement s'est fait selon le nombre de votes par facteur (1 = la plus haute priorité, 16 = la priorité la plus basse).

Factor	Number (and percentage) of total votes	Priority ranking
Decrease in the amount of carrion	54 (21.1)	1
Inadvertent poisoning	34 (13.3)	2
Electrocution on electricity transmission structures	33 (12.9)	3
Exposure to agro-chemicals	24 (9.4)	4
Loss of foraging habitat (to e.g. agriculture, urban development)	20 (7.8)	5
Unsustainable harvesting for traditional uses	20 (7.8)	6*
Lack of an awareness/conservation ethic	18 (7.0)	7
Collision with electricity cables and tower guy wires	14 (5.5)	8
Disturbance at roosting and breeding sites	13 (5.1)	9
Direct persecution by landowners	12 (4.7)	10
Drowning in high-walled farm reservoirs	6 (2.3)	11
Shortage of bone material in the diet	3 (1.2)	12
Lack of roosting and breeding sites	3 (1.2)	13
Variation in carcass composition	1 (0.4)	14
Inappropriate food items	1 (0.4)	15
Lack of surface water	0 (0.0)	16
Total	**256 (100.0)**	

*In April 2007, one year after the workshop was held, a report commissioned by KZN Wildlife (Mander *et al.* 2007) revealed alarmingly high levels of harvesting of Cape Griffons in parts of South Africa for traditional medicine purposes; these levels are considered to be unsustainable and it is predicted that this factor will significantly hasten the extinction of this species. Had this information been available at the time of the workshop, it is highly likely that the 'harvesting for traditional uses' mortality factor would have received a higher ranking than it did.

Group of South Africa's Endangered Wildlife Trust will render assistance to the CGTF by providing a coordinating role, providing interim administrative support, and investigating the funding and appointment of a full-time or part-time CGTF coordinator.

References

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